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I.—*A Visit to the Blasket Islands and the Skellig Rocks.*

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THE Blasket Islands are the most westerly inhabited islands in Europe. Inishvickillane is five miles further west than the most westerly point of the mainland of Ireland, nearly three degrees further west than St. Kilda, and nearly a degree further west than the most westerly point of Spain. The Skellig-Rocks are nearly, but not quite, so far west. These islands partake of the same character as most of the coast of the south-west of Ireland. They are stupendous piles of rock (for the most part trap and mica slate), which tumble headlong down to the sea or run out in perpendicular promontories. On the top of these cliffs there are often grassy slopes and green valleys gay with the white flowers of the bladder campion and the pink blossoms of the thrift. On some of these islands there are sheep, on many of them great numbers of rabbits; but their chief interest lies in the almost innumerable sea-fowl which breed on the grassy slopes and on the precipitous cliffs.

The Blaskets are a group of half a dozen islands and numerous less important rocks. They lie about 150 miles due west of Killarney. The Great Blasket is the largest of

these islands, and the only one that contains a village; Inish-vickillane (or Inishmackillaun, as it was called half a century ago) is the next largest and is inhabited by a single family. The next in size is Inishnabro (formerly Inishmubro), and it is the loftiest, rising 583 feet above the level of the sea. It is uninhabited. There is a lighthouse on Inishtearaght (the Tiraght Rock of the old maps), but no other houses. Inish-toorskert (which used to be called Inishtuiskero) and Beginish (the Beginist of the old maps) are quite uninhabited. There are no trees on any of the islands, and the shores are for the most part precipitous cliffs, where it is very difficult to find a landing-place.

I have paid two visits to the Blasket Islands, one in 1889 and the other in 1890. From Cork to Tralee there is a railway, but from Tralee to Dingle is a long drive of thirty-two Irish miles. The road passes along a range of mountains which rise higher and higher as the traveller proceeds westwards, until they culminate in the lofty peak of Brandon, 3127 feet above the sea. I arrived in Dingle on the 30th of April, and fortunately found my boatman waiting for a fine day to sail over to the Blaskets in his fishing-smack. I had just time to drive over to Sybil Head in a car to arrange with my climber to meet me in his canoe near Beginish on the following day. He is the youngest of three brothers, all fishermen, and is a handsome lad about 17 years old, belonging to the black-haired, black-eyed race that is to be found in some parts of Kerry and Galway, and is supposed by some to be of Spanish origin, but by others to be the remains of the old race which lived in Western Europe before the Celts came over. He only spoke Gaelic, but was a splendid climber.

We left Dingle early on the morning of the 2nd of May with a fair breeze and a dancing sea, which sometimes swept the decks, and as they were covered with sheep and oxen, I had to make the best of it. After rounding Sleah Head we steered northwards through the Blasket Sound, where a very swift current is always running. Soon after noon the wind began to drop, and we made but little head against the

current. Late in the afternoon we picked up my climber, who had come down in his canoe, but, unfortunately, he brought no wind with him, and when it began to be dark we decided to lower the small boat and row to Inishvickillane, a distance of five or six miles, although there was a heavy swell on. We passed numbers of sea-fowl swimming around us and heard the cries of the Manx Shearwaters as they flew past, and finally we landed on the little beach, the only landing-place on the island, and groped our way in the dark along the winding path which has been made up the Silurian cliffs.

We had whistled loudly, hoping to arouse the family to come to our help; but they were afraid to come out in the dark for fear of the fairies, and the wild cry of the Oystercatchers was the only reply. On reaching the cabin we were greeted by two rather savage dogs; but they recognized my voice, and I soon received a warm welcome from the inmates, who immediately lighted their only candle, a rush drawn through the oily body of a Stormy Petrel. I spent the next day on Inishvickillane and had a successful morning's birds'-nesting, though it turned out wet in the afternoon, which of course I devoted to blowing my eggs.

The rain cleared away in the night, and the next morning a brilliant sun was shining on a calm sea, so we rose early to avail ourselves of a smooth passage to Inishnabro. It is rather ticklish work sailing on the broad Atlantic in an Irish canoe, which is only a framework of wood covered over with tarred canvas. Even in calm weather there is a considerable swell on the ocean, and the landing-place is a bare rock. My climber was safe on the rock in an instant, but a wave broke over me as I caught the rock and wetted me to the skin. We spent a delightful day amongst the birds which swarm on the island, taking a Peregrine's nest and several eggs of the Stormy Petrel. During our row home we passed several large seals, but they kept at some distance from the canoe. On the following day we again visited Inishnabro, and on the next made a longer voyage to Inishtoorskert, both visits being as full of interest as possible.

After devoting a day to visiting the lighthouse on Inish-

tearaght and another to Inishvickillane, where our headquarters were, we crossed over to the Great Blasket. There is a small village at the east end of this island, which has about 150 inhabitants. They are a curious, quaint lot of people, mostly fishermen, and they live in very primitive cabins, made of mud and stones. We had a very successful day on the cliffs, and returned to our headquarters at night.

We spent most of the next day in blowing and packing our eggs. On the day following the fishing-smack arrived by appointment to take us to the Skellig Rocks, but the wind proving contrary, we ran on to Dingle to wait for a favourable breeze. Fortunately the wind changed during the night, and we lost no time in crossing Dingle Bay, and, passing between Valentia Island and the mainland, we weighed anchor at Portmagee and rowed out to Puffin Island. As we stepped on shore we saw rabbits hurrying away to their burrows, and were soon lost in amazement at the prodigious numbers of Maux Shearwaters which breed on the island. We returned to Portmagee in the evening and sailed the next day to the Little Skellig, where the great colony of Gannets now is. After visiting the Great Skellig we started for home in the afternoon, but, although we had a fair wind, it was dark before we landed on the quay at Dingle.

The following notes comprise the most interesting of the ornithological observations made during the trip.

FALCO PEREGRINUS.

The Peregrine breeds annually on the island of Inishnabro in a cleft of a high cliff overhanging the sea. As we neared the spot the male bird began to fly round in circles, evidently uneasy at our approach. The female sat very close; we had to throw several stones down the cliff before she flew off and showed us the exact position of the nest, far away down the cliff. The rope having been adjusted, we lowered the climber down the precipice until two hundred feet of rope had been paid out. When I looked over the edge to see if the nest had been reached, a faint cry from below demanded more rope. Hand over hand we let out

forty feet more rope until we had only ten left, then, to our great relief, we felt the strain slacken, and we breathed more freely. Soon afterwards a pull at the rope signalled to us that the climber was ready to return, and we slowly hauled up the 240 feet of rope until the climber's head appeared over the edge, holding in his teeth a small red handkerchief containing three eggs, whilst the Peregrines in their excited flight were screaming their loudest.

We found a Peregrine's nest on Inishtoorskert in a much more accessible position, but it only contained one egg, considerably incubated.

A pair of Peregrines breed annually on Inishtearaght, but this year we were told that the Hooded Crows had devoured the eggs. A pair often nest on the Great Skellig, but not annually, as they do in other places.

FALCO TINNUNCULUS.

I was rather surprised to find a pair of Kestrels breeding on the island of Inishnabro. The nest was not a great way off the eyrie of the Peregrines, and contained four eggs, the nest itself consisting only of some dried grass loosely placed together.

SAXICOLA ŒNANTHE.

Wheatears were often seen, and I took several nests on Inishvickillane, also nests on Beginish and on Inishnabro.

ANTHUS PRATENSIS.

We found the Meadow Pipit breeding on Inishtoorskert and Beginish, as well as on Inishvickillane, where they are very common.

ANTHUS OBSCURUS.

The Rock Pipit we found breeding on Inishvickillane, also on Inishtearaght, and we saw several pairs of this bird on Inishnabro.

ALAUDA ARVENSIS.

We took a clutch of Skylark's eggs on Inishtoorskert, and the herdsman on Inishvickillane, where I was staying, found several of their nests containing eggs.

FRINGILLA MONTIUM.

The Twite breeds in several places on Inishtearaght; it has also been seen on the Great Skellig.

FREGILUS GRACULUS.

We saw a great number of Choughs, but found few nests. Many of these birds seemed to be wandering about in small flocks, without having any intention of breeding, possibly barren birds. A pair breed annually on Inishtearaght, and we were fortunate enough to take two clutches on the Great Blasket and a third on Puffin Island; several birds were about Inishvickillane, but I have reason to believe that they were not nesting.

CORVUS CORNIX.

The Hooded Crow is very common on the Irish coasts, and commits great depredations on the breeding-ground of the sea-birds. My climber got two nests, each with five eggs, on Inishvickillane, and we took several nests on Inish-toorskert, also one on the Little Skellig, besides one on Inishtearaght.

TROGLODYTES PARVULUS.

We found a Wren's nest, containing six eggs, at the extremity of the burrow of a Puffin. The eggs were more profusely spotted, especially round the larger end, than is usually the case, and the spots were larger than usual. Curiously enough, the nest was not domed. Inishvickillane was the island on which we found it.

On the Little Skellig the number of Wrens nesting in the crevices of the rock was most remarkable; we found twenty or thirty nests, but none of them contained eggs, though several appeared to be quite finished.

COLUMBA LIVIA.

The Rock Dove does not seem to breed in any great numbers around these islands, the only place where we took any eggs being on Inishtoorskert, where we got three clutches. I never noticed the birds at the Skelligs.

HÆMATOPUS OSTRALEGUS.

The Oyster-catcher was found on all the islands which

we visited. They lay their eggs on the rocks just above high-water mark, and the nests are merely a few blades of grass loosely placed together. We took one very handsome clutch of their eggs; the ground-colour, instead of being the usual pale brownish buff, was a pale greenish blue.

ARDEA CINEREA.

I found a solitary Heron's nest, containing three eggs, on Inishtoorskert, the most northerly of the Blaskets, an uninhabited island very seldom visited. This seemed to be the only pair breeding on the island. The nest was placed in a cleft of a cliff, not a very great distance from its summit, and consisted of sticks, built in the usual way by that bird, and was lined with grass.

LOMVIA TROILE.

We got some very handsome varieties of the eggs of the Guillemot on Inishnabro, where this bird breeds in great numbers. They are also very common on the rest of the Blaskets. The Ringed Guillemot seems to be specially common on the Little Skellig Rock.

FRATERCULA ARCTICA.

We found many colonies of Puffins breeding in the turf at the top of the cliffs. On Inishvickillane we got some very nicely marked eggs, with a zone of spots round the large end, and took others on Inishtoorskert, Inishtearaght, &c. On the Little Skellig they breed in such incredible numbers that their eggs are often found on the bare rock.

ALCA TORDA.

We got plenty of eggs of the Razorbill on Inishnabro, Inishtoorskert, Inishtearaght, and on the Skelligs, but there were very few handsome eggs amongst them in proportion to the quantity.

PHALACROCORAX CARBO.

Cormorants were abundant on all the islands. I got a clutch of four eggs on Inishnabro, and there was a large colony on Inishtoorskert.

PHALACROCORAX GRACULUS.

We took some nests of the Shag on Inishnabro. They were likewise common on all the other islands.

PUFFINUS ANGLORUM.

The Manx Shearwater is said to breed in abundance on Inishnabro (Payne-Gallwey, 'Fowler in Ireland,' p. 287), but neither on my visit to this island in 1889 nor in 1890 was I able to discover the slightest evidence that this is the case. As we neared Inishvickillane in the dusk of the evening, we heard the well-known cry of this bird, but failed to find a colony of them, though we spent many hours in the search. I obtained one solitary egg, which I found in digging out a Puffin's egg from down a rabbit's hole. There are plenty of Shearwaters on the Little Skellig, but their great breeding-grounds are on Puffin Island, between the Little Skellig and the mainland. This island ought to be called Shearwater Island, rather than Puffin Island. I was astonished at the enormous number we found nesting; they seem completely to have taken possession of the island, and far predominate over the Puffins; indeed, the whole of both sides of the island was inhabited by them. They lay only one egg, some considerable distance down their burrows; several which I dug out were four feet from the entrance. They make no nest, but lay their egg on the bare ground. In every case where I took an egg the old bird allowed itself to be lifted off the egg upon which it was sitting. These birds are never seen at their breeding-grounds in the daytime.

SULA BASSANA.

The Gannet used to breed on the Bull Rock in 1884 in great numbers (Barrington, 'Zoologist,' 1884, p. 477), but in consequence of the erection of a new lighthouse, which involved the blasting of rock, they deserted it. They seem to be all now concentrated on the Little Skellig, which has probably become their sole breeding-place on the Irish coast. As we approached this curious pinnacle-shaped rock, thousands of Gannets floated over our heads, their white plumage showing to wonderful advantage in the sun. As we neared

the island we could see that two sides of the rock were covered with the birds sitting on their nests, so close together that it looked as if a heavy fall of snow had just come on. Around us countless myriads of Guillemots, Puffins, and Razorbills, besides innumerable Gulls of several species, were flying and settling on the water. We rowed towards a side of the rock where the surf seemed less heavy than elsewhere, several seals following in our wake. My climber was the first to land, and was soon followed by myself and another man, whom I had brought with me to help. The noise of the birds was terrific, and their number so vast that at first we felt quite dazed. However, we soon pulled ourselves together and made at once for the colony of Gannets, the nesting-grounds of which are not unlike the Pyramids. The rock forms a series of high ledges arranged like steps, upon which the nests are placed so close together that it is impossible to walk without treading upon the eggs. On the top of the rock there is a flat space about twenty yards square, which is entirely covered with nests. We only found one egg in a nest, and this was jealously guarded by the old birds; indeed, so great was their devotion to their treasure that they did not move on our approach, and even allowed us to catch them round the neck. I noticed that they seemed unable to rise from a flat surface, and that in order to fly they were obliged to precipitate themselves over the ledges. The nests were made of various articles, mostly grass and rushes, but several also included pieces of rag and paper, the straw of wine-bottles, and pieces of cork. They are not very large for so big a bird, and somewhat resemble the nests of the Little Grebe, without the covering of moss which that bird places over its nest. Some of the nests contained newly hatched young, which were generally surrounded with several sorts of fish, brought by the old birds. I estimated the number of birds breeding on the rock at several thousand pairs.

There is a magnificent view from the top of the Little Skellig. Far away to the north lie the Blasket Islands on the horizon, while as far to the south lie the Bull and Calf

Rocks. During both my visits to the Little Skellig I never noticed any immature birds; all were evidently intent on breeding only.

LARUS MARINUS.

The Great Black-backed Gull is by no means a common bird on those parts of the Irish coasts which I have visited. I took a nest with three eggs on Inishvickillane the day after I landed, and on the following day I took several fine clutches on Inishnabro, the adjoining island. I also took some eggs on the Thunder Rock, an offshoot of Inishvickillane. They generally lay three eggs, never more to my knowledge. A few pairs were breeding on Inishtoorskert and a pair or two on Puffin Island and the two Skelligs, but there are no great colonies as there are of the Herring Gull. I was also told by the lighthouse-keeper on Inishtearaght that they breed there, but personally I did not see any.

LARUS CANUS.

The Common Gull is also one of the rarer Gulls on the Irish coast. I only found it nesting on the Blaskets, and there only on Inishnabro, in very small numbers.

LARUS RIDIBUNDUS.

I was surprised to find a small colony of Black-headed Gulls breeding on Beginish, a small island between the Great Blasket and the mainland. This island is quite low, and not more than 50 feet above the sea. The nests were placed near the centre of the island, on soft marshy ground, around which rushes were growing.

LARUS ARGENTATUS.

Herring Gulls were constantly to be seen. I found a small colony breeding on the grassy slopes of Inishvickillane, and a much larger one on Inishnabro, not very far from the summit of the island; we often found half a dozen nests in as many square yards. They were breeding in some numbers on Inishtoorskert and Inishtearaght, and less plentifully on Puffin Island. Great numbers were breeding on the Little Skellig and also on the Great Skellig.

LARUS TRIDACTYLUS.

Kittiwakes are very numerous, both at the Blaskets and on the Skellig Rocks, and breed in thousands on the cliffs, especially on Inishtearaght and the Little Skellig. Now and then we saw a flock of these charming birds following a shoal of fish, and near their breeding-stations their cries were constantly to be heard.

PROCELLARIA PELAGICA.

In a comparatively modern work, published in 1856 ('Fullerton's Gazetteer of the World,' i. p. 779), it is stated that "innumerable flocks of sea-fowl frequent the Blaskets or Ferriters Islands; among them is a delicious bird called in Irish *Gourdet*, resembling the Ortolan, and said to be peculiar to the Blaskets." Who would guess that this bird is the Stormy Petrel? There is an account of the excellence of the Stormy Petrel as an article of diet in a book published thirty years later (Seebohm's 'British Birds,' iii. p. 441). Mr. Seebohm spent a month on the Blasket Islands in the autumn of the very same year in which Fullerton's Gazetteer was published, and obtained both eggs and young in various stages of growth in the middle of September. It is quite obvious that the Stormy Petrel must rear two broods in the year, for I obtained a good many of their eggs in the last week of May on Inishnabro, the very island where Mr. Seebohm procured some in 1856. They were breeding amongst the rocks, and in what had evidently been rabbits' holes. I also found them breeding on Inishvickillane, and eggs were sent to me later on from both the Inishtearaght and Skellig lighthouses. In a recent work (Payne-Gallwey, 'Fowler in Ireland,' p. 259) mention is made of the Stormy Petrel hatching her *three* white eggs. Though I have seen several dozens of nests, I have never come across more than one egg in the same hole.

PROCELLARIA LEUCORRHOA.

Leach's Fork-tailed Petrel probably breeds in various places on the south-west coast of Ireland, and possibly in greater numbers than has been suspected. I got an egg on

Inishnabro on the 29th of May, 1889, which can only be that of Leach's Petrel, and which I have carefully compared with several specimens in Mr. Seebohm's splendid collection. A similar egg was taken on the 1st of July, 1886, by Mr. Regan, the keeper of the lighthouse on Inishtearaght, the most westerly of the Blaskets (Ussher, 'Zoologist,' 1886, p. 367), and shortly afterwards a second egg was procured on the same island (Ussher, 'Zoologist,' 1887, p. 349). My egg measures 1·31 inch in length and ·97 in breadth.

The foregoing list comprises all the species of birds which I found breeding on these islands. They are, of course, visited by many other species, both in summer and in winter, and more extended observations would add several species to the list of breeding-birds. In the various Reports on the Migration of Birds, accounts of the occurrence of many interesting species are to be found, both from the lighthouse-keeper on Inishtearaght and from that on the Great Skellig. In spring, and especially in autumn, almost any British bird may accidentally wander as far as the Blaskets.

During his stay on Inishvickillane in 1856, Mr. Seebohm actually shot a Hoopoe (*Upupa epops*) on the island, and he assures me that in those days the White-tailed Eagle (*Haliaetus albicilla*) bred every year on Inishnabro. We were informed that it used to breed on the Great Blasket, but that it had ceased to do so for many years. It has been recorded that the Black Guillemot (*Uria grylle*) nests numerously on the cliffs near Dingle and on some of the Blasket Islands (Payne-Gallwey, 'Fowler in Ireland,' p. 287), but I have never been fortunate enough to discover any traces either of these birds or of the Great Shearwater (*Puffinus major*). I trust, however, that I may be more fortunate when next I visit this paradise of sea-fowl.